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Student: **Michael Higley-Vance**

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EL7004-8

Dr. Alexandru Spatariu

The Online Learner

**Activity # 1: Engagement and Teacher
Presence in the E-Learning Environment**

Comments:

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Good introduction of e learning environment characteristics! If you want to read more research on teacher presence, interactivity, online discussions, etc do some searches in google scholar. I actually wrote a few articles myself related to online discussions quality.

Alex Spatariu 7 content 3 writing 2/11/2014

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Interactions Within the Online Learning Environment

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Interactions Within the Online Learning Environment

Technology is often the driving force behind many of the world's changes and innovations and e-learning is fast becoming the best practice approach for teaching and learning across many well established educational institutions. An engaged and productive e-learning environment is one in which the emphasis is on the interactions and relationships that exists between the teacher, the student, and the technology used to facilitate the learning experience (Hrastinski, 2008; Er et al., 2009; Skylar, 2009; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). Information and communication-technology, along with Web 2.0 and social media resources, provides multiple opportunities by which learners and instructors can connect within an online only learning environment.

The Online Environment

Online learning environments are becoming more frequent than ever before (Er, Özden, & Arifoglu, 2009; Skylar, 2009; Ferguson & DeFelice, 2010). In an online learning environment learners and instructors are physically separated from one another however, many of the learning activities and expectations are similar to those found in the traditional classroom (Higley, 2013). Synchronous and asynchronous learning interactions are the two most important online learning types and the most researched (Hrastinski, 2008; Er et al., 2009; Simonson et al., 2012). Synchronous and asynchronous interactions can help support teaching and learning within the online learning environment and make it possible for learners and instructors to communicate and interact effectively (Er et al., 2009; Skylar, 2009). Online learning environments offer

learners and instructors just as many ways of interacting, connecting, and sharing as traditional classrooms environments.

The Need to Connect

In traditional learning environments learners can attend classes and be passive recipients of the knowledge and content. In online classes, this passiveness can result in low efficacy and interest by the learner often resulting in unsuccessful course completions (Rhode, 2009; Wright, Dhamarajan, & Reju, 2009). Essentially learning requires only one relationship to exist and that relationship is shared between the learner and the content material to be learned (Berge, 1995; Hrastinski, 2008). However, the need for interaction and the connection with others varies between learners and is a major factor for determining how these learners will best learn. If social factors and learner needs are not addressed within an online setting, learners may feel a sense of isolation and disconnect between the content and instructor (Wright et al., 2009). Learning for some students is a growing and satisfying experience but for others a source of inconvenience and anxiety (Rhode, 2009). Therefore, if authentic learning is to happen within a virtual environment the learner must have positive interactions with the content, the instructor, the technology, and other learners.

Student Engagement

In order to successfully participate in a virtual learning environment learners must be engaged in the learning process and content, which is the most important learner characteristic an e-learner can demonstrate (Hrastinski, 2008; Er et al., 2009). Huang, Lin, and Huang (2010) suggest that engaging learning opportunities enhance learner participation and could result in a deeper understanding of the content than that observed in traditional classroom environments

(Martinez-Caro, 2011). It should be noted however, that learners participating in online tasks can become overwhelmed and disinterested with the technology and learning environment resulting in the unsuccessful completion of these tasks (Diaz & Entonado, 2009). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the relationships and interactions needed between the learner, the learner environment, content, and instructor.

Synchronous interactions. The higher a learner perceives the level of collaboration within their learning environment the more content they are with the over all learning experience (Diaz & Entonado, 2009; Er et al., 2009; Rhode, 2009). Interactivity and collaboration are identified as two major factors in sustaining successful learning outcomes (Bonk & Zhang, 2006; Martinez-Caro, 2011). In online learning environments the instructor's role is facilitator, guide, and motivator (Diaz & Entonado, 2009) and can be accomplished through instructor feedback and learner collaboration. The key to success is for the instructor to carefully engage the online learner in collaborative and synchronous activities where learners are expected to discuss their learning processes that provide a unique and fulfilling learning experience (Hrastinski, 2008).

Asynchronous interactions. Learners need a sense of community to sustain a successful online learning experience and this can be reached through collaborative learning communities where the interaction is delivered in asynchronous ways (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Online learning environments support a learning reflection process because it meets the needs of learners who prefer to view, watch, and reflect upon the learning activities at their own pace (Bonk, & Zhang, 2006). In an asynchronous online learning environment the instructor's role continues to be about developing, motivating, and facilitating the learning experience (Diaz & Entonado, 2009). Facilitation of the reflection process can be best achieved through asynchronous collaboration by allowing learners to thoughtfully consider learning objectives,

goals, and performance outcomes because in an asynchronous learning environment learners have the time to critically synthesize their learning (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Bonk & Zhang, 2006).

Learner Relationships

Berge (1995) identified two types of interactions that are required to promote higher order learning: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, “rather than rote memorization” (p. 22). To get the most successful results from learners in an online learning environment, learners must be encouraged to interact with the content and the instructor (Berge 1995). Jackson, Jones, and Rodriguez (2010) found that the most important indicator for learner success was the level of interaction between the instructor and the learner. Additionally, Martinez-Caro (2011) established “teacher-student interaction [is] the strongest predictor of learning in e-learning” (p. 578). However, studies have shown that interactivity between the learner and instructor, alone, does not provide sufficient motivation and satisfaction to optimize learning and expected performance outcomes (Martinez-Caro, 2011). Therefore, two additional relationships that facilitate learning in online classes are also discussed below: the interaction between learners in collaborative activities and between learners and technology (Berge, 1995).

Learner to Instructor

Individualizing learning instruction is the fundamental educational philosophy behind e-learning and therefore, requires the instructor to facilitate the online learning process (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). In an online learning environment it is the instructor’s responsibility to provide the necessary lesson tasks that will help promote learning and positive self-efficacy (Diaz & Entonado, 2009). Martinez-Caro (2011) found that learning was increases when the amount of interaction between teacher and learner increased (Jackson et al., 2010). Lai and

Savage (2013) noted that four of the seven most significant factors contributing to a learner's satisfaction with an online course were directly related to the instructor's interactions. Lack of face-to-face interactions during online learning was the single most significant contributor to learner dissatisfaction (Martinez-Caro, 2011; Lai & Savage, 2013). Therefore, a supportive and nurturing relationship between learner and instructor might show a greater satisfaction with online courses (Jackson et al., 2010), increased motivation in learning (Diaz & Entonado, 2009), and greater learning outcomes (Jackson et al., 2010; Martinez-Caro, 2011).

Learner to Content

Learners in e-learning courses are more likely to be successful if they are independent, self-directed, and task-oriented (Hrastinski, 2008; Diaz & Entonado, 2009; Er et al., 2009; Rhode, 2009; Huang, Lin, & Huang, 2010). In an online learning environment, the relationship between learner and instructor has been changed from primarily synchronous to mostly asynchronous instruction and interactions (Yang & Cornelious, 2005; Higley, 2013). The relationship of learner to content is the only required link in learning (Hrastinski, 2008; Er et al., 2009); it is generally facilitated and motivated by interaction with the instructor. From a constructivist view, the biggest challenge for the online learner is overcoming years of traditional learning experiences and expectations to realize learning now rests solely on them (Carwile, 2007). In order for learners to be successful a significant role adjustment is required where learners must transition from being a passive learner to a more active participate (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). According to Yang and Cornelious (2005) learning is enhanced when learners take pause to adjust to a new learning environment, synthesize ideas, apply new ideas or concepts, understand how to participate, and most importantly be able to stimulate their own curiosity for learning and understanding.

Learner to Learner

Studies have provided mixed support between learner success and online interactivity and participation (Huang et al., 2012). However, there are many more studies that have shown that the collaboration and interactivity between learners is a significant factor to learner success in the virtual classroom (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Yang & Cornelious, 2005; Er et al., 2009; Rhode, 2009; Jackson et al., 2010; Lai & Savage, 2013). Ferguson and DeFelice (2010) found that learners were significantly more engaged in the online learning process when interactivity and collaboration was encouraged between learners than when encouraged between the learner and the instructor. During the literature review one study showed that learners were able to learn equally regardless of their level of collaboration or participation (Lu, Yu, & Liu, 2003). However, many researchers overwhelmingly agree that online collaborative learning communities increase learner participation through open discussions, lesson posts, and lessen the intimidation factor often associated with online learning environments (Yang & Cornelious, 2005; Er et al., 2009; Rhode, 2009; Ferguson & DeFelice, 2010; Jackson et al., 2010; Huang et al., 2012; Lai & Savage, 2013). Huang et al. (2012) cautions that it is unknown, at this time, if these collaborative learning interactions have any tangible benefits and therefore, more research remains to be conducted.

Learner to Technology

Learners must be able to interact successfully with the mediating technology for students to successfully learn online (Berge, 1995). The abundance of new technology and Web 2.0 resources allow for greater opportunities for learning online than the traditional classroom environment (Er et al., 2009; Skylar, 2009; Simonson et al., 2012). The benefits to the student for learning online are numerous, but a number of studies have shown one bad experience can

inhibit students from taking additional online courses (Lu et al., 2003; Martinez-Caro, 2009).

Therefore, it seems imperative that a meaningful relationship between learner and technology be established, encouraged, supported, and monitored as an essential responsibility for the instructor so that learning can take place.

Conclusion

Learners require interactivity, collaboration, and relationships to effectively learn. These relationships consist of connections that exist between the learner and content, learner and instructor, learner to learner, and between the online learner and the mediating technology. If these relationships are supported, within the online learning environment, learner satisfaction, self-efficacy, and the motivation to learn are increased. If these relationships are ignored, learners may feel disconnected from the content and alienated from the instructor and other learners. Though many researchers, educational institutions, and instructors support a learner-centered environment, it is the instructor that is tasked with developing and encouraging these relationships. Successfully developing and sustaining a learning environment in which these relationships and connections are supported will result in a greater perceived satisfaction in the online learning process.

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